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To be Native American and lesbian has been an interesting journey for me. A journey that has found me in an assortment of experiences. I have been in a visible leadership position either as a Native American or a lesbian *for the 15 or so years.* I was a co-founder of the first organization of lesbians and gay men of color to be formed in the Bay Area, Gay American Indians. Following the formation of Gay American Indians, the Gay Latino Alliance was formed and then the Third World Gay Caucus. The need for a lesbian/gay organization that focused it's political and social activities on ethnic and cultural identification existed because often our own people adopted a homophobic view (gayness is a whiteman's disease) and the white mainstream lesbian/gay community essentially ignored the third world lesbian/gay communities.

Through my experiences with Gay American Indians, I found myself increasingly involved with the mainstream lesbian/gay movement as I came to believe that the lesbian/gay movement needed voices of many colors. Yet to be involved in an intimate manner as leadership of the mainstream lesbian/gay community had an intense overtone. The stresses of working in the largely white movement have been difficult and at times demoralizing.

In 1981 and 1985, I was co-chair of the Lesbian/gay freedom Day Committee which produces the annual lesbian/gay freedom day in San Francisco. Being Co-chair of the Parade Committee put me in a highly visible position in the community and into immediate contact with racism and sexism. For example, at one particular meeting of the Parade Committee's Steering Committee, representatives of the Gay Rodeo came to make a presentation about the need for a mechanical bull at the celebration site and then concluded their presentation with a blatantly racist joke about Indians within the context of cowboys and Indians. All the Steering Committee members laughed including the other gay people of color. It was an uncomfortable moment for me because I not only had to point out the racism in the joke but I also had to, in a sense, reprimand the people of color about their incredible expression of racism.

1981
Boston



Time and time again I have found myself in the position of the messenger and the message being that it is not acceptable regardless of your racial identification to be hateful and mistrustful of those people because of their color or lack of.

Two of my strongest struggles with racism is my racism toward white people and being angry that even amongst people of color the world is still black people and white people. Native American is one of the races that you have to write in on the "other" line when filling out forms which request racial identification. And there are still groups of people of color who celebrate their representation and participation in the U. S. calvary which attempted to commit genocide on my people.

Most of the time I am the ^{only} Native American lesbian at any given event and even people of color, because I am not dark, will assume that I am white or they will ask if I'm From Spain. It's the white people who will ask if I'm from El Salvador, I say no South Dakota.

There are days when I feel truly invisible, and on those days I hunger for what I imagine as suburbia bliss, when nothing bothers you except that the mall is not open late or you've run out of mesquite for the grill. Yet I was raised to believe that as an INdian I have a responsibility to my people and that the people come first and it is through the people that you can realize your highest self.

In the 1980's, this belief gets translated in different ways because my people now also includes the vast community of lesbians and gay men. And within that community, many of the human contradictions and conflicts get acted out as recently evidenced by the recent behavior of the lesbians and gay men who either supported Pelosi or Harry Britt.

the duties of a
pom-pom girl?
cutting off braids
→ assimilation

I've sought refuge for the past year from those types of battles. In a sense, I was worn from being the messenger, the messenger of course can become the target. I was worn from being caught in between, defending my right to participate in the mainstream lesbian/gay community to lesbians and gay men of color who insist that means you've sold out, to educating the white lesbian/gay community about racism and yes that the lesbians and gay men of the world need heroes and heroines who are people of color. Oscar in Nicaragua has never heard of Gertrude Stein, Del Martin, Harvey Milk or Harry Britt and probably Del and Harry have never heard of Dora Maria Tellez, now the Minister of Health in Nicaragua, and one of the Commandantes who helped free Daniel Ortega from Somoza's prisons and Nicaragua from Uncle Sam.

There is a scene from an opera in which this great scroll rolls out down the steps and onto the lawn, I sometimes imagine I could roll out my great scroll of the racial injustices I have directly experienced from all of you who are not Native American and then I could roll out another great scroll listing the sexism I have experienced in the gay community from men of all colors and I could scroll on and on as it were.

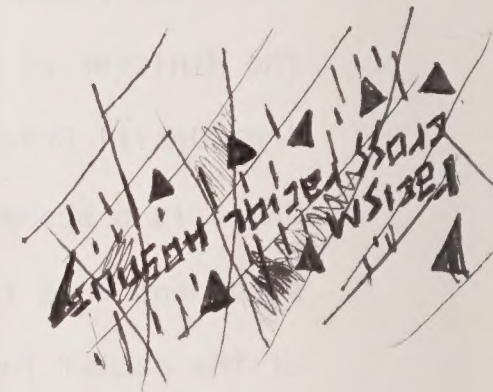
It is true that to be denied or mistreated by one's peers is painful. If you're a person of color and the pain you're experiencing is caused by another person of color, who is also supposed be your ally, then the pain moves into a dimension of confusion, betrayal and hostility.

It takes considerable strength and courage for me to live my life and this is not an exaggeration. But the most important aspect for me in living my life is not to dwell on the negativity or to acquiesce to the forces, whether institutionalized or subjective, which keep us separated and mistrusting and fearful. These kinds of workshops and presentations hopefully will provide some insight into your own lives, the kinds of belief systems you have. I am not interested in creating a oneness of people but a wholeness that includes respect for our differentness and maintains the integrity of differentness.



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